

Hypnosis in Sports

Michael J. Scott,
*United States Table Tennis Association, 533 Medical-Dental Bldg., Seattle,
Washington USA 98101*

Athletes in general have been well educated on the physical aspects of training but undereducated on the mental aspects. This has resulted in some very frustrated athletes who put in tremendous amounts of time training their bodies but achieve only mediocre results in competition. They fail to reach their maximum potential. They spend months or years training their bodies to perform well but only seconds preparing their heads. The irony is that many fail to see the inequity. The mind is a powerful tool. Not enough coaches or athletes take the time or effort to utilize it. It is a physiological fact that the mind directs the body. Greeks at the time of Socrates and Plato realized that training the mind and the body together was essential. Today sports psychologists, coaches and athletes are beginning to "rediscover" this truth and are placing more emphasis on the importance of the mental aspects in sports. Many coaches and athletes are becoming convinced that often the physical mistakes made during competition are a result of psychological factors. It is important to emphasize that the athlete's mental state is just as susceptible to training as his physical skills. Psychological stimuli from within or without the body may affect the athletes physical reaction and effectiveness.

Human thought is a complex, sophisticated, amazing, and ongoing process. It cannot be ignored when considering success in sports competition. With practice athletes can learn to control their emotional arousal level and other psychological factors just as they can improve physical skill. Utilizing both effectively will result in higher levels of performance.

The mind and body work as a unit and cannot be separated into distinct entities. Whatever affects one, affects the other. One should not be overemphasized at the expense of the other. Optimal achievements will be obtained only if both the body and mind are educated, programmed, or trained. The mental aspect is more important than most athletes realize. To achieve optimal results the emotional and mental skills must be trained and developed just as the physical skills.

The winner is not necessarily the one with the greatest physical strength or agility. Often, a player's motivation, determination, concentration, and confidence decides the winner or loser. Of two equally skilled players or teams the one with the superior "mind" is more likely to win.

We have come to associate physical athletic training with hard work, long hours, sweat, pain, or even exhaustion. Some believe that if these don't occur then it wasn't worth the physical effort. On the other hand, training the mind is neither measurable nor as easy as it sounds. To train or program the mind for athletics is a detailed variable process that must be learned and then faithfully followed. Sports psychology is not a quick fix. Athletes have to stick with and practice a mental training program just as they practice physical skills.

Mental training is beneficial provided the athlete is interested, enthusiastic, and aggressive about the challenge. As in physical training, changes in performance may not occur overnight. Initially the learning process may produce almost imperceptible

changes. This training should be performed in association with the physical training. As with physical training, mental training is not effective on a haphazard basis but should be practiced almost daily. Unlike physical training, mental training must be individualized to complement the athlete's unique personality and may be abused if it is not individualized.

Preparing yourself mentally for what you want your body to accomplish will dramatically increase the likelihood of success. Mental training, once accepted and applied, is the next great step forward in improving athletic performance.

In recent years hypnosis has been increasingly recognized and accepted as an effective modality in sports. Hypnosis is a fascinating topic often clouded and distorted by misconceptions, mysticism, and neglect. Hypnosis for entertainment and amusement has no more relationship to hypnosis in sports than astrology to astronomy; nevertheless the very word hypnosis conveys obsolete prejudices, taboos, and misconceptions to many individuals. Some physicians with little or no personal experience unhesitatingly condemn it.

Nevertheless hypnosis applied in athletics has proven highly successful in carefully selected cases. The era of superstition and incredulity toward hypnosis in sports is gradually being eroded by an awareness of its therapeutic values.

Hypnosis is but one of several techniques that are effective in the mental training of athletes. Hypnotherapy can effectively neutralize adverse stimuli of extrinsic or intrinsic nature.

Through hypnosis athletes can learn to control their emotional level and they can mentally block-out adverse emotional stimuli just as effectively as through physical training they can improve their physical skills. Utilizing both the mental and physical aspects will result in higher levels of performance.

Appraisal of the individual patient is important in selecting athletes for hypnotherapy. The athlete must have confidence in the hypnotist. Hypnosis in sports is a cooperative undertaking between both the hypnotist and the athlete. A basic knowledge of applied psychology and psychotherapy is essential for the hypnotist and the athlete must have earnest motivation to improve. Hypnosis is not a panacea, but often a valuable technique in athletics.

The three basic techniques I primarily use with hypnosis are:

- 1) Direct Suggestion
- 2) Symptom Substitution
- 3) Hypnoanalysis

Direct Suggestion

Suggestions given in a hypnotic trance are far more effective than suggestions given in the conscious state. For instance the ability to produce anesthesia by suggestion alone has gained great notoriety. Pain is not actually abolished but the emotional reaction to pain is altered. Were it not so time consuming in certain patients, and if all patients could be hypnotized deeply enough, it would be the ideal anesthetic. Brain surgery, thyroidectomies, hysterectomies, tooth extractions etc... have all been done with direct suggestion alone in a hypnotic trance.

So too has direct suggestion been proven in athletics. In many instances it is used primarily to obtain physical and mental relaxation and to relieve tension and stress.

Symptom Substitution

One method of reconditioning or reeducating the subconscious through hypnosis is replacing one habit pattern with another more constructive pattern. The new pattern must be logical enough to destroy the earlier pattern in the patient's mind. In symptom

substitution some undesirable mental or physical outlet is replaced with a more acceptable one.

Hypnoanalysis

In this procedure hypnosis is combined with an analytic method of psychotherapy. Hypnoanalysis attempts to change the structure of a patient's mind, to alter his view of things, and to improve his motivations. Each of us is a maze of conflicting desires and impulses which subconsciously influence our actions. Repressed fear, hate, love, anxiety, anger, painful experiences, frustrations etc... may consciously be forgotten but forever remain in the subconscious where they are capable of producing conflicts which may manifest themselves in functional disturbances. Obscure underlying conflicts, repressed anxieties, attitudes and impulses which have existed as suppressed underlying causes of neurotic behavior may come to the surface in one or two sessions. Conscious awareness of such underlying suppressed causes may completely disintegrate undesirable behavior characteristics.

Bibliography

- 1) Scott, M.J. (1960). Hypnosis in Skin and Allergic Diseases, USA.
- 2) Scott, M.J. (1961). Techniques of Hypnotherapy, USA.
- 3) Scott, M.J. (1963). Hypnosis in Modern Medicine, USA.
- 4) Scott, M.J. (1986). Skin Deep, USA.
- 5) Scott, M.J. (1989). "Mental Training Can Improve Your Game" United States Table Tennis Topic Magazine, USA.